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A graduate student in one of my classes recently observed, "All this talk of social classes gripes my Midwestern soul -- if you can call it that." I began to wonder whether this attitude was more widespread than I had believed. I had thought that the existence of social class was accepted by educated persons. Privilege or deprivation stemming from one's family background is not palatable to those steeped in the democratic tradition, but social class exists and should be recognized. Equality, justice, fair play, open avenues for progress, and equal availability of opportunity (commensurate with potential) are ideals rather than faits accomplis.

Recognition of the importance of social class can contribute greatly to solving the grave problems that confront educators today. Counselors and teachers have been bombarded with arguments about the desirability of attending college, antidotes for the dropout situation, and methods of meeting the vital need for developing unusual talents. Social class is a fundamental factor underlying each of these areas. Yet many school counselors are not aware of the impact of social class on the behavior of students and on their own and others' attitudes towards students.

## The Meaning of Social Class

One's status is determined by such factors as family prestige, occupation or profession, type and location of residence, standard of living, amount

and source of income, possession of power, educational background and achievement, and organizational affiliations. Status also is determined by behavior, mannerisms, dress, etiquette, language, use of leisure and attitude toward society and government. All of these play a part in determining the social class to which an individual belongs and the way he will be received by persons around him. The class to which one belongs designates, to some extent, conscious or unconscious attitudes toward others. Progress toward democratic ideals can be better achieved if counselors and teachers become aware of their own class biases in their relations with pupils and of the pupils' class biases in their reactions to the school environment.

The purpose of this paper is not to describe the social classes, but rather to indicate that they exist and that the counselor must act accordingly if he is to perform his function effectively. Havighurst and Neugarten combine several studies and make the following summary of population distribution by social class:[1]

| CLASS | PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION |
|---|---|
| I Upper-upper | 1-3 |
| II Lower-upper | |
| III Upper-middle | 7-12 |
| IV Lower-middle | 20-35 |
| V Upper-working | 25-40 |
| VI Lower-working | 15-25 |

The distinctions between the classes are not clear-cut; for instance, a Class III individual may have three characteristics of Class II and three of Class III. Mobility also obscures sharp divisions between classes.

## School Behaviors by Social Class

The "Midwestern soul" who does not believe in the existence of social class can find ready evidence

for it in the schools. All he has to do is say to a couple of youngsters who are about to fail, "I'm going to have to flunk you." One, the well-behaved, sincere, middle-class pupil, might plead, "I'll take home more work, do extra assignments. My sister (mother, father) will help me." The other might say, "I don't give a damn." And he means it. His mother or father, who averages perhaps an eighth- to eleventh-grade education, may verbally endorse the idea of education; but to sacrifice for it, to read current books and magazines, to take a night course, to talk about it until it becomes an obsession is quite unusual.

Ordinarily the public-school staff member does not encounter the Class I individual -- he is sent to private school. He is less concerned about degrees and status than is the lower-upper and the upper-middle class person. The other classes of pupils, however, are frequently encountered in the public schools. Therefore, a generalized description of these classes may be useful at this point.

Class II, III, and IV children (especially III) work hard, are obedient, and respect the teacher and the counselor. They have, though with great variability, a background for education through the example of their parents, the moral support of their families, and the presence of books and magazines in the home. Homework typically takes priority over designated household duties. Class III parents and pupils are said to have an "education compulsion."

Class V and VI pupils are found most frequently in the primary and intermediate grades, before drop-outs occur. They are not so conforming (they have been instructed "not to take nuthin' off nobody," and teachers represent authority), not so serious about school as those from the "right side of the tracks." Their average test intelligence is not as high as the average of those in higher classes, but one must remember that their tested IQ's are subject to question because of differences in reading skills, motivation, and the cultural bias of the testing instruments. Many Class V and VI children are brighter than the average of those in the higher classes simply

because these two classes comprise approximately half of the total population.

The existence of social class is nowhere more evident to the educator than in academic achievement, school dropouts, and the extent of formal education. A classic study by Hollingshead shows that over half the grades ranging from 85 to 100 are assigned to students in Classes I and II. Yet in a typical community, these students would represent less than 10 percent of the school population; in this case they constituted only 20 percent of the highest IQ groups. Among Class V pupils, only 8 percent received grades of 85 to 100; 66 percent, grades of 70 to 84, and 25 percent, grades of 50 to 69. Hollingshead found that the distribution of grades followed class lines and did not coincide with the indicated ability of pupils. This study showed that the proportion of high IQ's is somewhat greater in Classes I and II than in III and IV; nevertheless, a number of pupils in Classes III and IV had IQ's of 120 to 139.[2] Much of the "wasted talent" of which we speak is occurring among these high-IQ pupils in Classes III and IV.

Admittedly, many factors can help explain the generally higher grades among Class I and II pupils: the higher incidence of academic aptitude, the possession of background information which predisposes upper-class pupils to acceptable accomplishment, and the family emphasis on academic achievement by the upper-middle and upper class pupil. Nevertheless, in evaluating the grading situation, the role of school personnel should not be overlooked. The existence of class bias on the part of educational personnel is partially responsible. This bias is neither intentional nor personal, but it exists.

Educators are predominantly middle class; many are upwardly mobile from the lower-middle class and lower classes. They are actively, though not necessarily consciously, seeking to maintain or improve their status and to repudiate lower-class behaviors. The behaviors of lower-class pupils -- disdain for authority, tough language, alien moral codes, and especially skepticism about the value of formal

education -- tend to antagonize school personnel. The pupil's defense mechanisms -- indifference, truancy, rebellion -- further widen the gap between the cultural orientations of school workers and those of pupils.

Educators are well aware that evaluation -- i.e., grades -- does not always reflect actual knowledge or achievement. To an unfortunate extent, grades are reflections of the teacher's perceptions. Teachers more easily give an F or D grade to a pupil who "does not care," and whose parents seem not to care, than to the banker's son or the minister's daughter. This is particularly the case if the banker is on the school board and his wife heads, or even belongs to, the P.T.A. This discrimination may not be intentional; it may be the conditioned outcome of varying cultural perceptions.

Other school personnel may be guilty of similar kinds of discrimination. For example, an assistant principal said to a counselor who had initiated a group counseling session for potential dropouts, "How in the world did you manage to collect that scurvy bunch?" Counselors themselves may show their biases by expressing shock and resorting to preaching when pupils confide some aspects of their social behavior. And when many years of experience have caused the pupil to feel that there is "no use," counselors must resist the temptation to give up readily on sessions devoted either to behavior or to vocational and educational aspirations. "Why should I put myself out when the student doesn't even try?" is a common attitude.

Merely exposing these biases may prove to be an important step toward reducing the built-in discouragement of lower-class pupils. Often those who protest these conditions most vehemently are the very ones who need to change their perceptions.

To an even greater extent than the grading situation, the school dropout situation is largely a social class phenomenon. Typical analyses of dropouts indicate reasons such as work, early marriages,

grade failures, inability to get along with teachers, dislike of social relationships in the school and the belief that courses are unrelated to actual needs. All these reasons are, at least to some extent, attributable to social class differences.

Perhaps, as Havighurst[3] suggest, factors such as the following are fundamental causes for the high rate of dropouts characteristic of the lower social classes:

1. Lower-class students do not participate in student activities, except football, in proportion to their representation in the school population. They are not an integral part of the school.

2. Lower-class students are not likely to be able to afford the currently in-vogue shoes or the approved trousers that they believe are expected of others. Thus, they are unable, or think they are unable, to gain the peer approval so important to adolescents.

3. The hidden costs of attending school (books, laboratory fees, student-body tickets, club dues, yearbooks, class rings, etc.) prevent them from feeling that they are part of the student body.

4. The cliquishness of youngsters is a formidable barrier to becoming an enthusiastic participant in school life.

All these factors reflect social class differences. They are as much responsible for dropouts as any of the reasons usually given. The low rate of post-high-school education among the lower classes can be attributed to the same situation.

## Implications for Counselors

The causes of behavior are neither simple nor single. Membership in a given social class is not an inclusive explanation of low grades, school failure, dropouts, or failure to attend college. Nevertheless, I would argue (1) that social class is an important factor in each of these, and (2) that the basic factor of socioeconomic status is overlooked in counseling guidance, while less fundamental factors, such as low grades, receive more attention. Whether counselors are concerned with the saving of talent or the more extensive self-realization for all pupils, they would do well to consider the importance of social class.

Counselors, first, should become aware of the existence of social class in the schools where they work. Moreover, they should examine their own perceptions for evidence of social class bias. Awareness and introspection are not enough, however. Counselors should take leadership in broadening the educational goals of the school so that the academic curriculum is not the only one which is considered respectable.

In dealing with lower-class pupils, counselors should realize that this group faces a dual school problem: like middle-class pupils, they must adjust to academic demands, but they must also adjust to cultural demands, many of which are new to them. Aggressive, defensive, or indifferent behavior on the part of these pupils may represent a way of dealing with the conflict between parental (and neighborhood) values and those middle-class values which characterize the school. This kind of recognition by counselors can lead to certain positive steps.

Working on a broader scale, counselors could take a leadership role in forming group sessions that emphasize the importance of social class in the behavior of adolescents. Discussion groups focusing on school citizenship, club membership, orientation for new students, or behavior in school cliques can involve participants from all classes. The effectiveness of such discussion groups is dependent on the assumption that adolescents will not consciously

adhere to cliquishness or snobbery any more than teachers will be consciously discriminating. Students often act without thinking. Making people aware of the effects upon both the object of prejudice and the person who is prejudiced is a first step in changing behavior. In addition, the counselor might well take the initiative in leading group discussions by teachers on the nature and implications of social class. Even though the teachers already may be aware of these influences, reinforcement of their awareness and discussion pertaining to ways in which to deal with the problems would be beneficial.

Once counselors recognize the importance of social class in relation to school behavior, they can begin to take positive measures such as the ones just indicated. By attacking the more fundamental causes of a problem such as school dropouts, the counselor's potential contributions to the individual and to society can be enhanced.

## REFERENCES

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[2]Hollingshead, August B. Elmtown's Youth: The Impact of Social Classes on Adolescents. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1949, pp. 172-175.

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